

**The Artist as a Young woman in Edna Ferber's *Fanny Herself***

**B. Agathiyan**  
**Ph.D. Research Scholar**  
**Department of English**  
**Annamalai University**  
**[agathu18@gmail.com](mailto:agathu18@gmail.com)**  
**8870732746**  
**&**

**Dr. K. Muthuraman**  
**Professor of English**  
**cum**  
**Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts**  
**Annamalai University**

Edna Ferber wrote the semi-autobiographical *Fanny Herself* in 1917. It is the first novel in which she highlights the conflict inherent in the American Dream: the struggle among professional success, personal fulfillment and the need for artistic expression. The setting is yet another Midwestern town, Winnebago, Wisconsin. Fanny, a young girl, watches as her widowed mother takes control of the family store and runs it, like a man would, in order to support herself and her two children. It was a time when there were “plenty of women wage earners in Winnebago, as elsewhere; clerks, stenographers, school teachers, bookkeepers.” However, Fanny’s mother is different.:

But here was Molly Brandeis, a Jewess, setting out to earn her living in business, like a man. It was a thing to stir Congregation Emanu-el to its depths. Jewish women, they would tell you, did not work thus. Their husbands worked for them, or their sons, or their brothers. (*Fanny Herself* 10)

The novel clearly shows that Fanny's birthright is due to her Jewishness. The significance of Fanny's Jewish identity is established in the novel's opening. *Fanny Herself* begins with a description of the heroine's childhood, an extremely important time in Fanny's

life because it reveals the forces shaping her character. As the narrator explains, "It was about this time that Fanny Brandeis began to realize, actively, that she was different" (24). She feels "different" because she is a Jew. "She went to Temple on Friday night and Saturday morning, when the other girls she knew went to church on Sunday" (24).

Fanny's religious practices are not the only things that distinguish her from her playmates. In the words of the narrator, "The real difference was temperamental, or emotional, or dramatic, or *historic*, or all four" (24 emphasis mine). As this claim suggests, her personality is marked by her Jewishness. The significance of this "brand" is further emphasized by the uncertainty with which it is represented. The narrator seems unable to pinpoint precisely the difference in Fanny's character. There is the possibility that it is either temperamental or emotional or dramatic or historic or, perhaps, even all four. While the "historic" aspect of Fanny's otherness, as we will see, is crucial to understanding her character, the initial vagueness with which her difference is described is terrifically significant.

One of the most important ways this is signified is through the narrator's use of the epithet "little Oriental" to describe Fanny. While the term connotes an exoticism that Edward Said has criticized in his work on *Orientalism*, in Ferber's novel the word provides the narrator with a way to endow Fanny with special qualities that have positive attributes. Though the heroine is figured as other, her difference distinguishes her in a noble way. The most important trait that Fanny has as a result of her otherness is her creativity. Her imagination marks her difference from her gentile friends. For example, in the middle of playing tag with them, Fanny is struck with a flight of fancy:

Little Oriental that she was, she was able to combine the dry text of her history book with the green of the trees ... and [beauty of the scene] to evolve a thrilling mental

picture therefrom. The tag game and her noisy little companions vanished. She was peopling the place with stealthy Indians. Stealthy, cunning, yet savagely brave. They bore no relation to the abject, contemptible, and rather smelly Oneidas who came to the back door on summer mornings, in calico, and ragged overalls, with baskets of huckleberries on their arm, their pride gone, a broken and conquered people. She saw them wild, free, sovereign.. .They were Sioux, and Pottawatomies (that last had the real Indian sound), and Winnebagos, and Menomonees, and Outagamis. She made them taciturn.. .and lithe, and fleet ... . The fat and placid Capuchin Fathers on the hill became Jesuits sinister, silent, powerful with France and the Church of Rome behind them. (25-6)

This passage speaks volumes. Not only does it reveal Fanny's creative side, but it also suggests where her alliances lie. Obviously, she has great sympathy for the Indians that she draws from her imagination as she renders them free, wild and sovereign. In Fanny's dream world, they are not yet conquered and broken but "savagely brave." She refuses to think of them in the terrible situation in which they now live. Instead, she gives them the glory that they once possessed. Importantly, the narrative reveals that Fanny shares some of their traits. When she is roused from her reverie with a "Slap!" and told, "Ya-a-a! Tag! You're it!" her flight of fancy dissipates, and "the next moment she was running as fleetly as the best of the boys in the savage pursuit of one of her companions in the tag game" (26). In describing Fanny as "fleet" and in a "savage" pursuit of one of her friends, the narrator paints a picture of her with the same brushstrokes that the girl used to describe her Indians: the Sioux, Pottawatomies, Winnebagos, Menomonees, and Outagamis. They have the same qualities — the same look. Moreover, Fanny and her Indians are obviously both Other—different and set apart.

The novel makes it clear that Fanny's position as an ethnic other endows her with a special aesthetic sensibility that is inextricably linked to her sense of kinship with different marginalized and oppressed peoples. At various moments, the alienation Fanny feels, temperamentally, historically, and dramatically makes her acutely sensitive to the pain and suffering of others. As the narrator explains, "thousands of years of persecution behind her made her quick to appreciate suffering in others, and gave her an innate sense of fellowship with the downtrodden" (108). Fanny's Jewishness thus gives her a special sensitivity to the plight of those, like her, who are painfully excluded from the mainstream. Fortunately, this sensitivity sparks her creative impulses, and 'from sorrow comes song.' One of the characters from the novel explains:

No artist can become a genius until he has suffered. You've suffered, you Jews, for centuries and centuries, until you're all artists—quick to see drama because you've lived it, emotional, oversensitive, cringing or swaggering, high-strung, demonstrative, affectionate, generous. (122)

The importance of the historic difference, referred to earlier, thus becomes clear. Like other Jews, Fanny has a distinct temperament and a dramatic sense drawn from the centuries of Jewish suffering that makes her an artist, and her aesthetic sense is expressed in her drawings.

The requirement that the suffering comes from a long historic tradition makes the equivalency of suffering and talent different from the suffering experienced by romantic poets. For the romantics, suffering led to an artistic creation that was subjectively based. In *Fanny Herself*, we see suffering that is in tune with a large sense of community, and is, in fact, arguably the very essence of that community. Yet it also transcends it, bringing people together in the code of *meshlichkayt*. Subsequently, it is not surprising that Fanny sketches

factory workers, immigrants, and other city dwellers whose oppression inspires her creative impulses. In reflecting on her Muse, Fanny reveals:

It was the spirit of Molly Brandeis [her mother] in her, and of Molly Brandeis' mother, and of her mother's mother, down the centuries to Sarah; repressed women, suffering women, troubled, patient, nomadic women, struggling now in her for expression. (164)

The Jewish Spirit in Fanny manifests itself in her art, and as an artist her mission is to expose and protest against oppression. Fanny's drawings thus reveal the Jew in her. As one of the novel's characters explains after seeing her sketch of a Jewish fish vendor from the Chicago ghetto, "it took a thousand years of suffering and persecution and faith to stamp that look on his face, and it took a thousand years to breed in you the genius to see it and put it down on paper" (188-89). The genius in her work makes people take notice of her subjects. It forces them to confront the oppression of those who are marginalized. Her gifts certainly parallel Ferber's. Both artists capitalize on the injustice of marginalization, making their audience's feel for those they represent in their works.

## **References**

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